

Comparative analysis of major classifications and definitions of child maltreatment



There is a lack of uniform, consensus-based definitions of child maltreatment, both within and across sectors and countries. This hinders attempts at consistent measurement of child maltreatment. **Aim: to identify discrepancies and similarities contributing to consensus building.**

Method:

Framework analysis of six main classification systems:

- Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS) by English, D. J. & the LONGSCAN Investigators (1997);
- The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) and ICD-11 (WHO, 2019) coding manuals;
- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2008);
- The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017);
- International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN, 2006);
- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014).

Main findings:

CDC proposes hierarchical classification into types and subtypes.

5 classifications define child maltreatment into only types (from 4 to 7 types).

| | CDC | | | MMCS | | | WHO/ISPCAN/ DSM-5/ICD-11 | UNICEF |
|--|----------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Child Abuse | Physical Abuse | | | Physical Abuse | | | Physical Abuse | Physical Abuse |
| | Sexual Abuse | | | Sexual Abuse | | | Sexual Abuse | Sexual Abuse |
| Child Neglect | Psychological Abuse | | Terrorizing | Emotional Maltreatment | Acceptance & Self-esteem | Neglect | Psychological Abuse | |
| | | | Isolating | | Psychological Safety (Exposure DV) | | | |
| | Affect responsiveness | Inappropriate Autonomy | | | | | | |
| | Mental health Monitorization | | | | | | | |
| | Failure to Provide | Emotional Neglect | | Physical Neglect - Failure to Provide | Medical | | | |
| | | Medical/Dental Neglect | | | Feeding | | | |
| | Physical Neglect | Feeding | | | Clothes | | | |
| | | Clothes | | | House conditions | | | |
| | Educational Neglect | House conditions | | Hygiene | | | | |
| | | School dropout | | School dropout | | | | |
| Failure to Supervise | Exposure to violent environments | Bullying / Exposure to DV | Moral-Legal/ Educational Maltreatment | Exposure to risk behaviours | | | | |
| | Inadequate Supervision | Permissiveness to child's risk behaviour | | Permissiveness to child's risk behaviour | | | | |
| | | Safety Environment | | Physical Neglect - Failure to Supervise | Safety Environment | | | |
| | Substitute Care | | Substitute Care | | | | | |
| Co-occurrence of multiple types of abuse and neglect | | | | Drugs & Alcohol | | | Exploitation | |

⊗ The classifications did not all use the same criteria to define child maltreatment and its types; content analysis revealed the criteria were not all defined in the same way.

Key messages:

- ⊗ This study emphasizes the need for a consensus-based classification system of child maltreatment for consistent use by researchers, professionals, and policymakers.
- ⊗ It is essential to establish expert consensus on the types and/or subtypes of neglect and psychological maltreatment.
- ⊗ There is a need for expert consensus on the minimum criteria required to classify an act as maltreatment.
- ⊗ The classification of an act as maltreatment varies depending on the definition and criteria used by each system.